

GOLDEN DROPS

GOLDEN DROPS
The wisdom of Father Ignatius



Victor S E Moubarak

GOLDEN DROPS

FOREWORD

“**GOLDEN DROPS**” is a compilation of stories about Father Ignatius, a character from my first book “**VISIONS**” (ISBN 978 1 60477 032 2).

“**VISIONS**” is a fiction story of three children who see an apparition of the Lord Jesus on their way to church. They tell their priest, Father Ignatius, about it; and pretty soon news spreads throughout town.

People react to the news in different ways. Some readily believe, others mock and scoff in disbelief, whilst some react violently towards the children and their families.

Parishioners seek guidance from Father Ignatius whereas the Church seeks to hush the whole story in the hope that it goes away; whilst Jesus appears again and again.

“**VISIONS**” challenges readers to ask what they would do in a similar situation – as Christians, as parents or just as onlookers.

A must-read book for everyone ready for a reality check on what they actually believe.

Following the publication of “**VISIONS**” I published further short stories about Father Ignatius on my Blog “**Time for Reflections**” – <http://timeforreflections.blogspot.com/>

The stories chosen here in “**GOLDEN DROPS**” each tell a different tale in the life of Father Ignatius and none of them are taken from the book “**VISIONS**” – they are stand-alone vignettes chosen for you by readers of my Blog.

I have been greatly blessed by very kind and supportive readers of my Blog some of whom have encouraged me to put together the selection of stories published here as “**GOLDEN DROPS**”.

Thank you for purchasing “**GOLDEN DROPS**” (and “**VISIONS**”). I pray that God blesses each one of you dear readers, old and new, and may He be with you and your families always.

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DISTANT GOD

It was Good Friday, about nine in the evening, as Father Ignatius settled down in his armchair by the fire. It was still cold for this time of year and snowing yet again. He put a couple of logs on the open fire and picked up a book to read.

Moments later Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, entered the large living room and announced that Geoff Henderson had just called in and was waiting in the reception room.

“Oh let him in ...” said Father Ignatius standing up to greet his visitor.

Geoff Henderson was an architect and he had brought with him some plans to discuss some alterations to the Parish Hall and the area behind the garage. After their discussions were over the priest said:

“How are you these days Geoff? I haven’t seen you in church for a while now!”

Geoff hesitated as he gathered his papers together and sipped a little coffee.

“To be honest Father ...” he said finally, “I’ve been rather busy lately ...”

“Too busy to go to church?” asked Father Ignatius.

“Well ... actually, I feel that God is distant these days ...” confessed the architect standing up to leave.

At that point Canis the dog, who was lying by the fire, yawned heavily as he made himself more comfortable.

“That’s not a comment on what you’ve just said,” joked the priest, “sit down Geoff if you have a minute to spare.”

The architect sat down again.

“This dog and I have a special relationship,” said Father Ignatius, “when I take him for a walk in the park I sometimes let him off the lead. He runs away like mad here there and everywhere in no particular direction. He is free and he’ll go where he wants. Sometimes he is quite far away. It is he who has distanced himself from me Geoff; and not the other way round.

“Do you see what I mean?”

“Yes ... I do ... I suppose it is me who’s distanced myself from God,” replied the architect, “but I suppose it is because I no longer see Him as relevant in my life.”

“I wonder whether Canis sees me as relevant in his life?” asked the priest, “the other day I was cleaning the back garden and he looked at me as if to say ‘I like this ... I poo wherever I want and you get to pick it up ... that’s a special relationship all right!’ ” Geoff smiled.

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“And what’s more ...” continued the priest, “he seems to be absolutely useless. He is certainly no guard dog. If we were to have a burglar in the house he would probably show him where I’ve hidden my stash of chocolates.

“The other day he came face to face with a cat in the back garden. He stood still like a statue. Then turned his head towards me expecting me to run and bark after the cat.

“I did not move. The cat started to panic and run but then stopped in total confusion and looked at the dog.

“Canis looked at me and then at the cat once or twice, and then he whined and ran inside the house to hide in his bed.” Geoff chuckled quietly.

“But I like him Geoff,” said the priest, “and I wouldn’t part with him. And he seems to like me.

“Do you know ... I think God likes you. In fact I know He loves you for sure, because He said so, many times in the Bible.

“I suspect you’re off the lead now and you’re running successfully all over the place. You don’t need God really ... you have a great business, a lovely car which I must admit I envy, and a good life. No wonder He seems distant.

“But God is there all the same Geoff. Protecting you from more ills than you can imagine without you knowing it. All because He loves you.

“When you get the time, come and visit Him in church just to say Hello!”

Geoff said nothing.

“I don’t mean to be critical,” continued Father Ignatius gently, “we all get distanced from God at some stage or other in our lives Geoff.

“It would be wrong of me to see this happen to you and say nothing.

“Take one step at a time. Come to church on Sunday, and when you feel ready come to Confession. Or come again and see me for a quiet talk.

“You’ll find God will welcome you back in His loving arms like a father welcoming his prodigal son.

“You’re a good man Geoff deep down. I wouldn’t be doing business with you otherwise. I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thank you ...” said Geoff quietly.

“I’ll be praying also that you won’t charge me too much for the building extension!” said Father Ignatius.

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TEMPTATION

Father Ignatius read the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 4 Verses 1-11.

He waited a few moments for the congregation to sit down and then he continued:

“The devil appeared at the local supermarket one Saturday morning. He stood there by the main entrance looking menacingly and threatening. All the shoppers panicked. They escaped through every available emergency exits, jumped into their cars and drove off at speed.

“All except for one shopper. A small, short man, standing there by his shopping trolley holding a long shopping list in his hand.

“The devil advanced towards the small man and said angrily: ‘Do you know who I am?’

“ ‘Yes ... I do’ replied the shopper.

“ ‘Aren’t you afraid of me like all the others?’ asked the devil.

“ ‘No ... I’ve been married to your sister for 25 years!’ ”

Father Ignatius waited until the laughter died down, and then went on:

“The devil of course is no laughing matter. He exists alright, although his greatest trick is to convince us otherwise.

“If you were to ask people in the street what do they know about the devil, they would probably tell you about satanic worship, or satan possessing people, as they may have seen in the cinema. Some may mention a man with horns, a tail and pitchfork. But few would tell you of his existence and presence here and now.

“We Christians cannot possibly believe in God and not believe in the devil.

“Satan is amongst us every day of our lives and his task is simple; to lead us astray from the Lord.

“He doesn’t appear menacingly as he did in the supermarket in our opening story.

“No ... he is more subtle than that. He is present in our most innocent and slightest temptation; when we least expect him.

“He is that extra bar of chocolate we indulge in, that extra bottle of beer or glass of wine, that cigarette or whatever other weakness we may have.

“He is that tiredness and sleepiness on Sunday morning which tells you it does not matter if you miss Mass this week.

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“He is those extra minutes you take for lunch instead of being back at work on time; or the leaving early to go home.

“He is the odd flirtatious smile, which in time may lead you further on.

“And that’s how it starts my friends. A few minor indiscretions here and there which by themselves may mean nothing to you; but they’re the first stepping stones for the evil one.

“His subtleness and ingenuity are worthy of high praise indeed; for he tempts you when you least expect it.

“And the more devout you are the harder he works to get you off track. He will put doubts and worries in your mind where none existed before.

“Right now for instance, I suspect he is most annoyed to see so many of you here in church instead of somewhere else. Especially as the sun is shining and I’m sure you have so many more important things to do ... or so he’ll tell you!

“I will not go on and give satan more publicity than he deserves. But let me say that if he had the audacity to tempt our Lord, as we have read in the Gospel, he will not shy away from tempting us.

“Like Jesus did, we must tell the devil: ‘Go away satan’. And pray again and again that the Lord may come to our aid and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

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REJECTED

Father Ignatius came out of the Sacristy after Mass and found Sharon still in church with her little three years old daughter Petra. They were standing by the Statue of Our Lady trying to light a candle.

“Are you still here Sharon?” he asked, “how are you these days?”

He must have touched a raw nerve because tears started building up in Sharon’s eyes as she said, “We’re well Father ... doing as best we can ...”

Father Ignatius sat on the first pew and little Petra left her mother and came running to him, handing him her toy bear.

“That’s a lovely bear” said the priest taking it from her hands, “what is his name?”

“John ...” said Petra enthusiastically as she climbed on the pew and sat next to the priest. “John, you and me can now pray together ...” she added, as her mother a few feet away knelt down by the statue for private prayers.

Sharon was a single mother. Her husband left her for another woman just after Petra’s birth and has not been seen since. Eventually, having no news whatsoever of her run-away husband, she divorced him in the civil court and brought up her little child as best as she could on Social Security Benefits.

After a few moments of silent prayers she joined the priest and picked up her daughter on her lap.

“I’ve been trying to get a part-time job ...” she said, “nothing much, just a few hours a week to supplement my benefits and to become a little independent ...”

“That’s good ...” replied Father Ignatius gently.

“There’s just no work available ...” she said, “I can’t go full-time because I have no one to look after Petra ... and part-time work is either not available or is too far from home requiring two bus rides to get there ...”

Father Ignatius said nothing as he prayed silently and handed the toy back to the child.

“I feel such a failure ...” continued Sharon, “my life seems to be in a rut and stuck in failure ... I’ve been rejected by my husband ... rejected by my family who live too far away to care ... and rejected by every employer in town and society in general ...”

At this moment, almost by coincidence, the little girl on her lap said, “I love you Mama ...”

“Well ... you’ve certainly not been rejected by Petra ...” said Father Ignatius quietly as Sharon kissed the child on the head.

“And I know you haven’t been rejected by Jesus either ...” he continued.

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Sharon smiled weakly.

“Rejection is very hard ...” said the priest, “and we do sometimes feel as if we’re of no value or worth to others. But that is not always the case Sharon.

“We’re all valuable in the eyes of God, and we all have a contribution to make ... you are very valuable to your little daughter who relies on you for everything.

“It’s good that you’re trying to find a job; and I feel deeply for you at what you see as rejection from employers.

“Rejection does not mean failure.

“Sometimes rejection provides you with clarity on where to go next. You say you’ve tried the local factories, and the electric company and the gas works for some clerical work ...

“Perhaps your future does not lie there ... I can’t say where just now ... but maybe God is leading you somewhere else.

“For now it could be that you’re exactly in the right place where you’re supposed to be ... and God wants you to spend your time looking after Petra.

“Sometimes He answers us by saying ‘Wait ... not now ... stay where you are and trust Me’; ... do you see what I mean?”

“I understand ...” Sharon replied smiling weakly again.

“I shall pray for you Sharon ...” continued Father Ignatius.

“And now ... would you mind doing me a favor please?”

“Yes Father ...” she said.

“I’m having some trouble with the new speakers they installed in church recently. I wish to test the acoustics in here.

“Would you mind going to the lectern and read something from the Bible over there. Take Petra with you.”

Sharon walked to the lectern child in hand.

“Just read anything ... I’ll stand over here” said the priest.

Sharon opened the Bible and read the first passage at the top of the page.

“That’s good ...” said the priest, “wait a bit until I walk over there a little further back ... now read again ...”

She followed his instructions.

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“The speakers here sound OK ... I’ll go right back by the statue of St Peter ... when I get there could you read again please.”

Sharon waited until Father Ignatius walked slowly to the end of the church by the exit door and then started reading the Bible.

He raised his hand in the air to stop her then walked slowly to the front once again.

“As clear as a bell ...” he said, “I can hear your every word very clearly despite my old age ... and if I can hear you, I’m sure everyone else can.”

She smiled.

“Sharon ... we do need readers for Mass on Sunday. It’s really not fair to rely on just the same readers every week. You should really consider adding your name to the readers’ rota to help us out a bit.”

“But ... I can’t read ...” she exclaimed as she picked up her daughter tugging at her dress.

“You seem to have done OK just now ... just think about it,” replied Father Ignatius, “you don’t have to decide right now ...”

Sharon did think about it; and eventually she did join the readers list and did read on Sundays at Mass.

A few months later she also managed to get a junior clerical job working part-time at the local Catholic school leaving her child at the pre-school playgroup while she worked.

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FATHER IGNATIUS IN HELL

The first thing Father Ignatius noticed as he entered hell is the total and absolute darkness of the place. Not the faintest glimmer of light shone in that bottomless abyss of intense void.

He tried hard to peer into the pitch-black darkness to make out something, but it was totally in vain. He could see nothing. Totally and completely nothing.

It was then that he noticed the full and utter silence which accompanied the extreme blackness of this place. Not a sound whatsoever. It was as if he had gone suddenly deaf. He rubbed his fingers in his ears and concentrated hard but silence reigned supreme. He clapped his hands together but heard nothing. He spoke to himself and could not hear his own voice.

Darkness and silence had partnered together and negated all the senses as he knew them. He could not smell anything whatsoever. No burning fires and brimstone, or the acrid smell of sulphur he'd expected in this place. He could feel no burning sensation and pain. No cries of help or gnashing of teeth.

In other words; hell was nothing.

Hell was a total void of everything physical as he'd experienced in his previous life.

Yet in this pure nothingness he felt a very powerful and intense feeling of extreme sadness. An overwhelming grief leading to desolation and desperation tormented his very soul.

A continuous sensation of sorrow and anguish filled the emptiness which was hell.

He sensed another soul there too. He could not make out who or where it was but it was there, somehow, sharing the void with him.

He felt a telepathic communication with this spirit in similar torment. Not in words, not in images, but in a mutual empathic sensation, as if the two were one.

He shared that soul's torment which had lasted for an eternity.

There seemed to be no beginning as to when that soul arrived in this eternal void, nor any prospect of when its terrible suffering would end. The total and perfect hopelessness of this state of nothingness, this state of wretched emptiness, engulfed the forgotten soul consumed by its everlasting regrets.

For this lost soul constantly and interminably viewed and reviewed over and again its past life on earth; filled with memories best forgotten yet brought to mind with no respite. The inner pain from such memories tortured this forgotten soul left here all alone.

Father Ignatius shared with this soul the deep desire to weep bitterly for its past mistakes and its present solitary ordeal. But this was not possible, for there are no

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tears in hell. No matter how strong the desire to cry in profound regret, and so gain some temporary relief, this was not possible in a state of void. So the pain, sorrow and sadness built up within one's soul and consumed it eternally from within; with no respite whatsoever.

And what is worse, is that the soul's constant feelings of regret were persistently underlined by another sensation.

For it knew with unshakable certainty of the existence of God.

This tormented soul had been given, on entering hell, undoubted and unquestionable proof that God indeed exists. And somehow, it had witnessed His immeasurable and overwhelming love for His creations.

Yet the soul also knew, without a doubt, that for an interminable eternity, it would be totally excluded from that Fatherly, Divine love.

Father Ignatius realized that hell consisted of complete isolation with ones thoughts and regrets, and the sure knowledge that there will never be an end in sight. No light at the end of the tunnel. For there is no tunnel.

A permanent state of inner pain and sorrow, coupled with the knowledge that God's love is for ever out of reach.

“What a terrible state of despair and hopelessness” thought Father Ignatius, “to know for certain that God exists; and to know of His love for us; yet to be excluded from that perfect love for ever. To remain here, in a state of total void, filled with past memories and regrets for deeds long past. Alone, in permanent thoughts of total and infinite exclusion!”

Father Ignatius woke up suddenly from his turbulent dream.

It was then that he heard in his head, clear as a bell, the words: “Go and warn all you get to meet not to come to this place!”

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WHY BOTHER WITH MARY

The first “Any Questions” session held by Father Ignatius in the church center proved so successful that some members of the congregation asked him to hold another one. They enjoyed asking questions about church matters in general and the Catholic Church’s teachings in particular, and learning from both Father Ignatius and Father Donald answering honestly rather than “toeing the party line”; as one parishioner called it.

“Are you sure that the hot chocolate drinks and free cakes aren’t the real attraction here?” asked Father Ignatius.

He was assured that this was not the case and it was agreed to hold another meeting at which parishioners could invite guests.

The night in question was well attended with about sixty people packing the church center and sitting cinema style facing the top table. Father Donald was not available and he was replaced by the Reverend Harold Barnstable, the vicar from a neighbouring church. He knew Father Ignatius well as the two priests were members of the Area Ecumenical Council, a body set up to encourage contact and co-operation amongst churches from various denominations. The Reverend had brought a few parishioners from his church to the meeting with him.

After the first few questions about the benefits of church unity and what obstacles lay in the way of such a goal a young man stood up at the back of the room and said:

“Father Ignatius, I do not attend your church. One thing I can’t understand about you Catholics is your devotion to Mary. Granted, she was the Mother of Jesus, but no more than that. Yet you Catholics pray to her all the time and ask her for favours.

“Christ said ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.’ What can be clearer than that? Paul re-iterates this message in his letter to Timothy when he says, ‘there is one God, and there is one mediator who brings God and mankind together, Christ Jesus.’

“I consider devotion to Mary as blasphemy to God. What do you have to say about this?”

The Reverend Barnstable shuffled uneasily in his chair as he recognized the questioner as one of his parishioners. However, he politely looked sideways at Father Ignatius and said nothing.

Father Ignatius smiled and said calmly “I agree ...”

This silenced the audience who knew him too well and expected a rebuttal of the points made by the visitor. They were not disappointed. Father Ignatius continued:

“Viewed from your perspective, and considering the Bible quotations you mention, it can be seen as blasphemy to pray to Mary and ask her to mediate for us and present our needs to Jesus, and to God. So let us see your point from a different perspective.

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“Let me ask you something first. Have you ever prayed for a sick relative or friend to get better?”

“Well ... yes ...” hesitated the young man.

“That’s good ...” replied Father Ignatius gently, “it shows charitable loving intentions from you towards those people. You didn’t say ‘let them pray for themselves to get better’ but you prayed for them. You mediated on their behalf, or, to put it in more common parlance, you put in a good word for them.

“You said to God ‘Dear Lord ... you know my friend is a good chap ... please heal him from his illness!’ ”

The audience laughed.

Father Ignatius continued, “By praying for your sick friends you mediated on their behalf. And if it is God’s will, He sometimes answers our prayers.

“In the same way, there’s nothing wrong in my opinion if the Virgin Mary puts in a good word for me with Jesus when I ask her. God knows I need it!”

The audience laughed again.

“You see ...” went on the priest, “at the wedding in Cana when the wine ran out, the servants went to Mary for advice and guidance. She was a guest at the wedding, no more. They didn’t go to Jesus direct, or to the bridegroom, or to the best man, if they had such a thing in those days ... but they went to Mary.

“She interceded on behalf of the married couple; and Jesus at her request performed His first miracle.

“I believe this to be very significant ... is Jesus encouraging us here to ask Mary to mediate for us?”

“Some may not agree, but I personally see nothing wrong in asking the Virgin Mary to intercede on my behalf, and I ask her often to do so.

“But let me answer your specific point as to whether my praying to her is blasphemy ... as you called it.

“God saw fit to choose this young lady to be the Mother of His only Son. Obviously He holds her in high regards.

“I too ... hold her in high regards. This is why I recite the Rosary daily.

“Do you honestly think that when I get to meet God face to face He will punish me for daring to love Mary, the Mother of Jesus? Will God view my honouring her as blasphemy? I think not.

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“By praying to her, takes nothing away from my reverence to God and Jesus. Like you, I accept God as my Creator and Jesus as my Saviour; and I also pray to Mary to mediate on my behalf.

“Nothing wrong with that ... and certainly no blasphemy intended!”

“I understand ...” replied the young man sheepishly.

“It was a good question,” continued Father Ignatius, “but let me get back to your two quotations from the Bible.

“When Jesus said He is the way to God, and when St Paul re-affirmed this, they were referring to Christ as being the Son of God and our Saviour through His sacrifice on the Cross.

“They were not saying that we should not honour the Virgin Mary who holds a high place in Heaven. And no where in the Bible are we told not to pray to her or ask her to mediate on our behalf.

“We’re all sinners, and we need as many friends on the other side as we can muster. I also pray to Saint Ignatius of Loyola after whom I was named.”

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FATHER IGNATIUS FACES FAILURE

Father Ignatius was sitting at his desk reading his morning mail when there was a knock at the door.

“Do come in,” he said in his jovial welcoming voice.

The door opened and a young man came in.

“Hello Timothy ... I haven’t seen you for a while. Are you well?” asked the priest.

Timothy sat on the armchair by the window. He held his head in his hands and looked down without talking. The priest noticed that he was shaking a little ... could he be crying?

“What’s wrong Timothy?” said Father Ignatius as he stood from his desk.

The young man looked up; his eyes were bright red from holding back the tears and trying to compose himself as best he could. Father Ignatius said nothing for a while and waited for Timothy to speak when ready.

“I’ve failed my driving test ...” he finally blurted out, “my father will kill me ... he paid a fortune for driving lessons!”

“I’ve known your father for a long time,” replied the priest calmly, “and I know for a fact he is not a killer!”

Timothy looked up and smiled a little.

“I take it you haven’t told him yet.”

“No ... I ran straight here from the Test Center. I don’t know why ... you can hardly do anything about it can you?”

Father Ignatius smiled at the apparent lack of confidence the youngster had in him. He turned to the cupboard behind his desk and came back holding a small camera.

“Do you mind if I take a photo of you?” he asked Timothy.

Timothy looked surprised and before he could say anything he heard the clicking sound from the camera.

“What ... what did you do this for?” asked the confused youngster.

Father Ignatius put the camera on his desk and sat in a chair opposite Timothy.

“I just wanted to record this very moment in time ... for posterity do you understand ...” then after a moment's silence he continued, "Let me tell you something.

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“Failure is sometimes necessary if we happen to learn from it.

“It is only a picture in time when you happen to click your camera and record it for posterity. Just as I’ve done right now ... recorded your moment of failure.

“But if we were to move our camera pictures forward and see other pictures, the chances are that the individual we’ve photographed has learned from his failure and gone on to greater success.

“When Christ hung dying on the Cross His followers saw failure.

“Here is a man whom many followed and listened to. As many as five thousand at one stage when He fed them loaves and fishes. They witnessed His many miracles and expected great things from Him. A new Ruler, a new King, someone to bring them freedom from their Roman oppressors. Yet here He is, beaten, tortured, humiliated and dying on a Cross amongst thieves.

“Failure indeed.

“Yet, a few more photos further on and we see the Resurrection, the Ascension into Heaven, the sending of the Holy Spirit, a new church born and growing from strength to strength several centuries later. We are redeemed from our sins.

“Everlasting success.”

The priest paused briefly.

“So it really depends on which picture we focus on. The one I’ve just taken of you, or the one in a few months’ time when you’re driving your car all by yourself?”

Timothy smiled.

“I’m sure your father will understand when you tell him your test result. He too was a learner driver once and he wants the best for you.”

“I’m sorry ... I just panicked ... I’d better get home now,” said Timothy.

“Remember Timothy” added the priest, “Failure is only what is recorded at a particular moment in time ... and no more than that.

“Bear this in mind the next time a camera clicks to record your personal failures; and take courage in the knowledge that, with God’s help, you can turn your negative moments into positives for others to emulate.”

Timothy got up to leave.

“And don’t worry ... there’s no film in this camera!!!” smiled Father Ignatius.

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UNEXPECTED CONFESSION

Confessions were normally heard on Saturday morning at St Vincent Church by either Father Ignatius or Father Donald; or sometimes both priests when it was near a Feast Day such as Easter or Christmas.

One Wednesday evening, as Father Ignatius was all alone in the Parish House, the door bell rang and there stood Ben Moon.

“Father ... may I ask you to hear my confession please?” he asked politely.

“Would you like to go to church?” asked the priest hesitantly.

“No ..., this isn't a quick ‘Bless me Father for I have sinned’ type of confession.”

The priest did not react to the attempted joke.

“You'd better come to my office,” he replied, “but first let's go to the kitchen and prepare some coffee.”

Minutes later the priest walked up the stairs with a tray of coffee and biscuits followed by Ben Moon.

Ben was a local businessman. He wasn't too involved in church, apart from attending Mass every now and then. But he was a very generous donor. Many a time he left Father Ignatius a very handsome check in support of some event or project which the church was supporting. His wife though was always in church, attending various meetings and organizing several events and activities.

“What's on your mind Ben?” asked Father Ignatius as he sat at his desk.

“Father ... I no longer love my wife!” came the direct reply.

The priest did not readily react, but almost instinctively he said a silent prayer. He asked the Holy Spirit to guide him in what to say, and he prayed for this couple whom he knew for some years.

The short silence was interrupted by Ben, who continued, “for some time now we have been drifting apart. We argue constantly. I let things pass to avoid further arguments and I've reached the point where I can take it no longer ...

“Any advice you care to throw my way?” he concluded with a weak smile.

“It depends whether you want me to speak as a priest or as a man ...” replied Father Ignatius.

“Hey ... what the heck ... either would do ... I'm at the end of the road anyway ...” laughed Ben.

“The end of the road?”

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“Yes ... I can take it no longer ... I want out of here, as they say.”

“In that case, it seems to me you’ve reached a decision already,” replied the priest, “and perhaps all you need is my re-assurance ...”

Ben didn’t reply. Father Ignatius continued.

“Many people believe that just because we are priests we don’t understand the pressures and difficulties in a marriage. We don’t understand that sometimes people do drift apart. And the love and caring that was there at the beginning is now a little faded and tattered round the edges.

“I know that marriage is a hard-working lifetime commitment which involves both people working together everyday, despite all the difficulties, despite all the pitfalls, and despite all the problems that life might bring. I realize that sometimes this proves too much for some couples, just like in your case. But that’s no reason to stop trying Ben.

“I don’t need to know the details that led to this, but I urge both of you to try harder to reach out to each other and, with God’s help, renew that commitment ...

“Have you considered speaking with a counsellor; or if you think I can help in any way ...”

“Father ...” interrupted Ben, “I’m afraid it’s gone beyond the help of a counsellor ... I’ve been seeing someone else ... and I spoke to my solicitor about divorce ...”

“I see ...” said Father Ignatius. He stopped for a few seconds to underline the severity of what he had just heard. Then he continued calmly.

“So what do you want to confess exactly? The fact that you don’t love your wife, or that you have been unfaithful, or that you want a divorce?”

Ben shook his head pensively as he put down his cup.

“I’m sorry to have troubled you Father,” he said standing up.

“Don’t go just yet ... sit down,” asked the priest gently, “you see Ben, you put me, and Jesus too, in a difficult situation.

“When we come to confession it is with the intention that we will not commit that particular sin again, or at least try not to.

“You seem to have decided that you wish to leave your wife, forget your marital vows, and move on to a new life.

“It’s a confession all right ... but it doesn’t show remorse, nor does it seek forgiveness.”

GOLDEN DROPS

“As I said ...” replied Ben abruptly, “I am sorry to have troubled you. Perhaps I shouldn’t have come here at all. I haven’t told Josie yet ... but I will tonight, after a stiff drink or two ...”

“I shall pray for both of you ...” said Father Ignatius standing up, “please Ben, give it some time ... don’t act too rashly ... you don’t have to tell her straightaway ... think about this some more.

“If there’s anything I can do please let me know ... ask Josie to come to see me if she wishes ...”

Father Ignatius was struggling in an already decided situation. Ben was determined and he knew what he wanted to do.

The priest stood in the car park as he watched Ben drive away. He prayed silently for a few moments as he imagined how Josie would take the news. She was a lively, jovial person always willing to help in church. He could hardly imagine that such a couple who’d been married for some years looked now destined for a break-up.

He did what he always did in seemingly helpless situations; he placed it in the hands of God and repeated “Thy will be done oh Lord.”

That evening Ben arrived home and found his wife crying.

“Oh God ...” he thought, “she’s found out ... perhaps that priest has been talking on the phone ...”

He poured himself a large whiskey and asked grumpily what’s been going on.

Eventually, amongst the tears Josie confessed that she’d been seeing the doctor for some tests and they had diagnosed cancer.

That night life stood still.

Ben did not tell her his intentions. He arranged for other tests to be carried out privately at a hospital where he had business connections. When the diagnosis was confirmed he stood by his wife throughout the prolonged treatment which lasted several months.

He stopped seeing his other friend.

Eventually, as he nursed his wife to full health, slowly but surely he learnt to love her once again.

And now ... two years later, he is still with her, never having told her of that fateful evening when he visited Father Ignatius; and when the kindly priest knew that he was out of his depth and handed the whole matter to Higher Authority.

GOLDEN DROPS

FATHER IGNATIUS IN LONDON

Father Ignatius got out of the London Underground at Oxford Circus station. It took him a minute or two to find his bearings, and then he turned to his trusted A to Z of London Streets.

He consulted his book for a few minutes and then looked at his watch. As he had plenty of time before his appointment he decided to tour around for a while. It was such a long time since he last visited the Capital, and no doubt much had changed since, so he decided to enjoy the next hour or so. He headed for Regent Street, then Bond Street, and aimed in the general direction of Park Lane getting in and out of various connecting streets in the process.

“This is certainly the opulent part of London,” he thought, as he admired the luxurious shops, restaurants and cafés. He did a bit of window shopping and was astounded at the prices they were asking for a variety of goods and gifts he’d never believed existed, never mind wanted or needed.

“Would anyone pay that much for a watch?” he asked himself outside a jeweller’s. He looked twice to make sure they had the decimal point in the right place. Yes ... that’s the right price for sure. He shuddered at the thought of carrying a fortune on his wrist.

He witnessed many chauffeur-driven posh cars and limousines drive by, or stop outside various buildings and bejewelled ladies and rich men walk out.

“This is so different from my poor little town,” he mused, “one bracelet or necklace could feed several poor old folks in my Parish for a month.”

And by coincidence his thoughts of poverty turned to reality when he noticed at a corner in a side street two men in dirty tattered clothes huddling together, sitting on the ground, near an air vent at the back of a building. They were trying to keep warm by absorbing whatever heat came out from the dirty black grille low on the wall. By their state of unconsciousness it was obvious they had been drinking cheap hard cider mixed with methylated spirit; a favorite brew leading to quick oblivion for the down-and-outs, he had once been told by someone who’d come begging at St Vincent Church.

The sight of extreme poverty living side by side with such wealth reminded Him of Christ’s story of the rich man and Lazarus at his gate.

Eventually he reached his destination and asked the concierge at the door of a splendid building for Miss Strickland.

“You must be Father Ignatius,” said the man wearing an immaculate uniform.

Father Ignatius was impressed as he was led to the elevator and taken to the top floor. He was asked to wait in a palatial room with a large mahogany table and chairs in the middle, and decorated with genuine masterpieces hanging on the wall. Above him hung three large magnificent crystal chandeliers which would have required their own power station to keep them lit.

GOLDEN DROPS

Minutes later a tall beautiful American woman came in.

“Ignatius dear ...” she said softly as she hugged him tightly and kissed him on the cheek.

Still standing close beside him she held his hands gently in her hands and said nothing for a short while; she then raised his right hand to her lips and kissed it before letting go. It was then that the priest noticed her eyes welling up, yet she retained full control of her emotions. He said nothing. And those few moments of total silence spoke volumes to the two of them.

“Let’s sit down,” she said breaking the silence as she pulled a couple of chairs from the table, “it’s been a long time ...”

It had been a long time indeed. Father Ignatius had first met Genevieve Strickland in London when they studied together at University. They had fallen in love and became very close friends.

They never told anyone of their feelings for each other because at the time Ignatius was fighting his own personal secret battle. He loved her dearly and yet somehow ... deep inside within him, he knew that this love was not meant to be.

Eventually he summoned the courage to tell her that he’d decided to go to Rome and study for the priesthood.

It was literally a heart-breaking farewell when they parted. A farewell which shaped those two young lives all those years ago, and set them in totally different directions.

“It’s so nice to see you again Ignatius after all these years,” she said with a smile to ease the tension a little.

Father Ignatius smiled back gently and said nothing.

“Do you work here Genevieve?” he asked finally, wondering why she had written to him asking for an urgent meeting after such a long time.

He hadn’t seen her for a lifetime, yet she retained her youthful beauty just as he remembered her from their days as young students. Her lovely smile radiant as ever and her beautiful deep blue eyes reminiscent of holidays they’d spent together by the sea in Southern France.

“No, I don’t work here ... I own the whole company,” she replied with timidly.

Father Ignatius said nothing, stunned as he was by that reply. Genevieve, his Genevieve from years gone by, now owns this well-known famous brand name. How could it be?

She told him that she had stayed in London after they parted all those years ago, and got a job in the City and then decided to work for herself. To cut a long story short, one success led to another and she was now worth a fortune.

GOLDEN DROPS

“I am very happy for you,” said Father Ignatius.

“I have decided to stop working Ignatius,” she continued, “and to return home to America. I will leave the business in the hands of a good friend of mine who will manage it for me.

“You must be wondering why I asked you to meet me Ignee ...” she went on with a laugh.

“Do you remember I used to call you Ignee? I believe you didn’t like it much ...”

He smiled gently.

“Anyway ... back to business,” she said pretending to be serious.

“First of all I wanted to meet you one more time before I move to the States. I did not want to leave Britain after all these years here and not see you one more time. I doubt that I’ll ever return here again.

“It’s so sweet and kind of you to agree to meet again.

“Second, I wanted to let you know that I have set up a Trust Fund for you Ignatius.

“It will pay you a nice sum every month for life rising every year in line with inflation ... I have all the paperwork sorted out and my lawyers are waiting next door ready for you to sign.”

He was totally dumbfounded by what he had just heard. She smiled sweetly and said nothing.

“Thank you ...” he mumbled quietly after a pause which seemed to last an eternity, “that’s very generous Genevieve, but I can’t possibly accept ... I am a priest now, and I really lack nothing ... I don’t want to sound ungrateful ... I vowed long ago ...”

She moved slightly forward in her chair and put her hand gently on his mouth to stop him talking. After a short pause she moved back ...

“Listen Ignatius ... please hear me out,” her lips trembled slightly, “I hope you’ll understand me ...

“When you left me for Rome all those years ago it really broke my heart. I did let you go; to follow your calling as you said at the time. But I really never got over it.

“I cursed and hated God for taking you away from me. I understood your decision to become a priest, but I never accepted it. I stopped going to church and to put it bluntly God and I just parted company.

“Once you left I looked for a job here in London and concentrated all my energies on work. I’ve done well of course but after all these years and all my wealth my one regret is that you were never with me to share my success.

GOLDEN DROPS

“I have more than I’ll ever need.

“My gift to you is perhaps my way of making peace with God. Please accept it Ignatius.

“You may not need the money for yourself, but please take it and use it for whatever good you think it can do. Do it for me as a special favor Ignatius.”

At this moment Father Ignatius saw those two tramps huddled together in the cold London street by the hotel grille.

He accepted her generous gift and signed the papers witnessed by her legal team. She took him by chauffeur driven limousine to one of London’s most famous restaurants for lunch and then to a tour of the Capital visiting many old places they used to frequent.

And now ... years later, the poor folks in his Parish are still benefiting from her legacy to the kind old priest who kept the flame burning in her heart.

She lives in America and writes to him once a year to wish him a Merry Christmas.

GOLDEN DROPS

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

“Jesus answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ ”

Father Ignatius stopped reading from the Gospel of St Matthew Chapter 22 and looked up at the congregation sitting there.

“And that’s where the problem lies,” he said, “love your neighbor as you love yourself.

“It’s almost too difficult for some people; and do you know why?

“It’s because too many people just do not love themselves.

“Yes ... that’s right ... they don’t really love themselves.

“They find faults with themselves and see no reason to like or love who they are. Many have a problem with their self-image or about their character in some way.

“They think they don’t look pretty enough for today’s society.

“And it is not just our physical appearance that some of us find cause to dislike; the shape of our nose, or our ears or whatever else we think is wrong.

“Some people don’t love themselves because they feel inadequate in some way or other. They feel they’re too shy perhaps, or not bright or clever enough like their friends, or not successful as others at work or in business.

“Many people sadly conjure up any reason they can think of which erodes their self-confidence, their self-esteem, and leads them not to like or love themselves.

“When Jesus said ‘as you love yourself’; He did not mean we should all have a Narcissus complex and be totally self-centred and self-obsessed.

“He was teaching us to appreciate who we really are. Not the outer part of ourselves, the visible body which we may find fault with, but our inner self. Our very soul!”

Father Ignatius paused for a while.

“We are the Creation of God. Each one of us different and unique. Each one of us beautiful in our own way and worthy of love,” he continued with a smile, “God does not make mistakes. There are no rejects off His production line ...

“Every one of His Creations is different, unique, and perfect in every way. And certainly worthy of love.

“And with your help, I will prove it to you.”

GOLDEN DROPS

He looked up at the congregation in anticipation. They were intrigued and he definitely had their full attention.

“I want you to promise me you’ll do as I ask ... will you do that?”

They nodded and some said yes and agreed.

“When you get home after Mass I want each one of you to take a piece of paper and write down two or three things about yourself which you like.

“It could be anything. Your ability to play the piano perhaps, or the fact that you’re a hard worker, or maybe you’re a good cook, or you are good at drawing, painting or writing.

“Or it could be that you sing so well that the neighbors have broken all your windows to hear you better!”

They laughed.

“And when you’ve written down your list of two or three items, I want you to consider them as gifts from the Good Lord especially for you.

“Whatever is good about or within you is from His making, and not from your own efforts. He gave you the ability to sing, dance, and play music or whatever else you are or can do. These are gifts He gave you when He made you as a baby all those years ago.

“And as you learn to thank God for these gifts, as you begin to appreciate these gifts from Our Lord, especially and uniquely for you; then slowly and in time you’ll learn to appreciate yourselves.

“You’ll start to like yourselves as you really are; a gift from God.

“Whoever you are today is a gift from God. Whatever you do with your lives is your gift back to God.

“And as you learn to love yourselves a little better, then will you be able to appreciate and love your neighbors as Jesus commanded.”

GOLDEN DROPS

FAITH

Father Ignatius looked out of the window and heard the electrically-motorized milk van driving down the hill as it slowly approached the Parish House. The distinctive whirring of the battery operated motor, and the clinking of the glass milk bottles rattling against each other in their crates as the vehicle started and stopped every few yards, enhanced the musical dawn chorus as the sun woke up gently from its sleep.

Clink ... clink ... clink ... sang the milk bottles as the birds chirped merrily amongst the trees greeting a new day. Clackety clack ... clackety clack ... clackety clack ... responded an old steam train in the distance as it danced past slowly on the metal rails.

The priest came down the stairs from his office and opened the front door just as Len, the milkman, put down two pints of milk on the doorstep and collected the empty bottles left there the previous night by Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper.

“Hello Len ...” he said, “please do come in ... I have a list somewhere of other items which Mrs Davenport asked for. I believe she wants an extra pint of milk, some cream, butter and cheese. Come sit in the kitchen whilst I find her list!”

The milkman sat down by the warm stove in the kitchen whilst the priest searched for the list prepared by his housekeeper.

“That’s an odd poster you have here ...” said the milkman pointing at the wall, “To have Faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see ... What does that mean exactly?”

“Well ... it means what it says I suppose. To have Faith is to be sure that things will turn out exactly as you hope they will. To believe in something without seeing it ...” replied Father Ignatius, “It’s from the Bible, Hebrews Chapter 11.”

“Yeh ... I guessed that much. It’s still odd though” mumbled the milkman.

“What’s odd about it?”

“Well ...” Len hesitated a little, “I’m not a religious man Father, a bit above my head all this religious stuff ... but it is a little difficult to believe in something blind like ... without proof ... without seeing it with your eyes!”

“I agree ... it is more than a little difficult. Very difficult I would say. That’s why they call it Faith.” replied Father Ignatius handing Len the list.

“I believe in God ... I haven’t seen Him of course ... but I believe He exists. And in more ways than one I have proved it to myself, or He helped in proving it to me, that He exists all right.

“Now I can never prove His existence to you ...”

“I would agree with that,” laughed Len.

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“I could not prove it to you ...” continued the priest gently, “but God could prove His existence to you ... if only you’d be willing to take the first step ... to dare to believe without any proof.”

“I can’t see myself doing that Father!” said Len reading the list prepared by Mrs Davenport.

“God asks us to trust Him ... and He’ll do the rest” said Father Ignatius, “let me tell you a story ... have you got a few minutes?”

The milkman nodded.

“There once was a very famous tight-rope walker. You know the kind ...

“He’d walked across many rivers and ravines and canyons on a rope stretched between two points; and every time he attracted great crowds who came to see him. He was always successful, of course, and kept his balance despite the weather, the high winds and other difficulties which made his act both dangerous and exciting.

“And over the years he became very rich just by walking on a rope!

“One day he decided to retire. And for his last performance he decided to cross the Niagara Falls on a tight rope.

“Well ... on the day in question the whole world and his uncle was there to witness the event.”

The milkman smiled.

“Before performing his walk the tight-rope walker picked up the microphone and thanked his audience for their support over the years.

“He then asked them ... ‘Do you think I’ll be successful crossing the Niagara Falls?’

“The audience cheered enthusiastically and said ‘Yes ...’ in unison. After all they’d witnessed his many walks over the years.

“So the tight-rope walker continued, ‘this time however it will be a bit different ... I’ll walk across on this rope but I will also push a wheelbarrow in front of me ... do you think I’ll be able to do this successfully across to the other side?’

“The audience shouted again ‘Yes ...’ with one voice.

“OK, said the man ... ‘I need a volunteer to sit in the wheelbarrow ... who will come across with me?’

“Not surprisingly ... nobody volunteered ... the crowd remained silent. They had seen him perform his walks many times over the years ... but not one of them had the courage to go across with him.”

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The milkman looked at Father Ignatius rather puzzled.

“You see Len,” continued the priest, “they did not have Faith in him, even though they had seen him walk on a rope many times.

“And that’s what God asks of us ... to have Faith, even without seeing for ourselves.

“To dare to trust Him without any proof. To dare to sit in the wheelbarrow and be carried by Him.

“A little difficult you think? I say it is ... it is very difficult to trust and to believe without any proof whatsoever.

“It’s very difficult indeed to have Faith ... but the rewards are really worth it!

“So it’s up to you ... whether you want to sit in God’s wheelbarrow or not.”

As Len went to his milk van to fetch the items on Mrs Davenport’s list, Father Ignatius brought a small booklet of St Matthew’s Gospel from his office.

“Here Len ...” said the priest, “have a read of this ... I hope it sets you thinking. And when you finish it ... I have another booklet for you if you wish!”

GOLDEN DROPS

LEFT HOLDING THE BABY

Father Ignatius had finished his weekly shopping at the supermarket. He jumped into his car and drove to the gas filling station across the road.

It was one of those self-service stations where drivers were expected to fill up their cars by themselves at the pump. The priest got out of the driving seat and began his purchase when he was approached by a young lady in her early twenties pushing a baby in a pram.

“Are you a priest?” she asked.

He was wearing his white collar at the time so he nodded and replied “Yes, I am. How can I help you?”

“It’s an emergency you see ...” she said, “I have to go to the toilet quickly. Can you look after my baby for a few minutes please?”

“Well I ...” he hesitated.

“I can’t wait ...” she cried and ran across the street towards the supermarket, narrowly avoiding a car by inches. Within seconds she was out of sight behind some bushes and trees in the supermarket’s car park.

The priest looked down at the pram at a child who was about to start crying. He leaned down to the child and that was the signal for it to howl loudly.

“There ... there ... little one,” said Father Ignatius trying to soothe the child by shaking the pram gently. But the more he tried the more the baby cried louder.

By now other cars had queued behind him to get their gas. One or two impatient drivers tooted their car horns. Another opened his car window and let out a profanity only to realize who he was speaking to and then apologized profusely.

The priest looked at his watch and towards the supermarket. The young lady was nowhere to be seen. He ushered the drivers to use another pump.

He waited and waited but the mother never arrived. The baby continued to cry louder and louder. So he decided to pick it up and it was soon obvious what the problem was.

The baby smelled to high heaven having answered the call of nature.

“What do I do now?” thought the priest. “Changing diapers is not something they taught us when I trained for the priesthood.”

He decided to lock his car and made his way, baby held tightly in his arms for fear of dropping it, towards the small shop where you pay for your gas purchases.

It was quite a sight when he entered the shop with a howling smelling baby. A young dude said: “Hey man ... I thought you folks are meant to be celibate. What

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have you done?"

One or two others laughed as the priest approached the shop counter.

"Your baby stinks ..." said the young cashier.

"I know ..." replied Father Ignatius gritting his teeth. "Can you please call the police?"

"Why ..."

"Because I asked you to ... Hand me your phone ... This is an emergency." replied the priest losing for a brief moment his usual calmness and serenity.

About forty minutes or so later the police arrived.

Obviously they did not consider the situation an emergency as the priest had described. By then the baby had stopped crying as he slept in the priest's arms. All the time Father Ignatius mind was focused on the large tub of ice cream melting gently in his car. "Funny how your mind wanders at moments like this," he thought to himself.

The police officers took their time taking the details of the situation. They recorded his name and address and asked him to describe the young mother. He couldn't remember much of the brief encounter but helped as best as possible under the circumstances.

Eventually, over an hour and a half since he'd first met the young mother, the police officers decided to take the baby away with them, as well as the pram which by now had been soaked by the rain pouring outside.

Father Ignatius drove back to St Vincent Church and spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning ice cream from the back seat of the car.

That evening the priest sat down by the fireside to reflect on his afternoon adventures when the door bell rang. It was the police. They advised him that they had found the mother and re-united her with her child. She wanted to see him at the hospital.

"At the hospital?" asked the priest.

"Yes sir. Apparently on her way back from the supermarket to collect her child from you she slipped on something and was concussed. An ambulance was called and she was taken to hospital. When she woke up she told us what happened and we re-united her with her baby."

The priest visited the mother at the hospital that same evening and met her husband as well as other members of her family.

The mother's wish was for Father Ignatius to baptize their baby. The young family is now members of his congregation.

GOLDEN DROPS

ENTRENCHED IN GOOD WORKS

It the same in most churches I suppose. People volunteer to do certain jobs and they become entrenched in these positions.

Mr Petroni and Mr Richards always stand at the back of the church and welcome people in. They hand out the hymn books and take the collection aided by Mr Harrison and Mr Gregory. They've been doing is for years and will probably continue to do so for ever more.

Mrs Florenti has played the organ for years too and does not see herself ever stopping Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Weddings and funerals too.

Miss Jemeson leads the church choir, Mr Duke trains and organizes the altar servers, Mr Malek cuts the grass and does the gardening, Miss Henderson and Mrs Polanski clean the church and undertake the flower arrangements ... and so on and so forth. I need not name them all.

Father Ignatius ... well, he's busy every Sunday of course, and he's grateful for all the help he gets from his faithful parishioners.

One Sunday he faced the congregation and started his sermon thus:

I've been your Parish priest for almost twelve years now. I've seen many people join this church, many couples married, many new babies baptized and taking first Communion and Confirmation, and sadly many people dying and departing to be with our Lord.

I'm very grateful for all the people volunteering to do all the various tasks there are to do in a church like this one. I couldn't cope alone without your help.

And in my time with you here, I have seen something else too. Sunday after Sunday as I face you here to preach my humble sermons and do my best to keep you awake. I want to show you what I see from here.

Could you all please turn round and look at the stained glass window high up behind you.

Do you see what I see?

You must have observed it time and again as you leave the church after Mass. There's a huge cobweb there that's been growing year after year. I first noticed it about eighteen months ago when it became more visible and dirty.

At first I thought of asking one of the more athletic people amongst you to get a ladder and clean it out; because I doubt that I can raise my sixty-three years old bones all the way up there and do it myself. But then I thought "No ... I'll leave it a while and see if anyone else notices it"

And I've seen it grow week after week after week.

GOLDEN DROPS

The reason I mention it today is two-fold

First, I'd be glad if someone could help with cleaning it out. But that's not important.

The important thing is that the cobweb up there reminds me of sin.

We all get busy in our lives doing this and that; and in church we volunteer at doing the various tasks which are needed to keep a church like this one going strong. That's our outer visible self, as we see ourselves, and as we wish others to see us.

Yet, deep within our souls, in our private lives, we may well hide a sin or two. Small ones at first ... hardly visible like the first spider's threads as they are stretched from one point to another.

Then to this are added other threads, and others too until we have a whole spider's web. Mostly invisible at first, unless the bright sunlight shines through that stained glass window to reveal the whole outline. In time, dust settles on the web until we have the large cobweb you see up there.

The small sins are hidden by bigger ones which go un-confessed and hidden from view. Until they are made visible by the bright light of Christ as He enters our lives.

So let's all use that cobweb as a reminder to look deeply into our souls and undertake some spring cleaning by seeking the Lord's forgiveness for our sins.

GOLDEN DROPS

APPROACHABLE IGNATIUS

Time was when priests were more approachable and people felt more at ease discussing their problems with them and seeking guidance. But times change and with them habits and customs change too.

Nowadays people are more willing to spend their hard-earned cash consulting psychiatrists and counsellors than asking the man of God for his wisdom and opinions.

Somehow, this distancing from one's flock has been precipitated by busy modern lifestyles where people are working all hours at their disposal. And priests too are pre-occupied with Parish meetings, Ecumenical Councils, and various other tasks and targets set upon them by their clerical hierarchies.

Father Ignatius was well aware of this changing trend, and being an old-fashioned old-school type of priest he did his utmost to keep in touch with grass roots in his church. He knew most people personally by first name, he visited them at home often, or in hospital when they were ill, or at the police station or jail when they were in trouble. And in turn, they did not hesitate to trouble him with their worries and problems at all times of night and day.

Many times did he settle down of an evening to watch his favorite team play football on TV, or to listen to his favorite classical music when the phone rang and a parishioner needed help. Or the door bell rang, and they brought their problems to his doorstep or lounge even!

Mrs Frost was such an example when she turned up to the Parish house one evening in tears.

“My husband has just left home” she sobbed as she sat down on the settee clutching a handkerchief tightly in her hand.

Father Ignatius listened attentively and sympathetically. There was very little he could practically do straightaway. The newly married couple had a row about something or other and Mr Frost stormed out of the house in a temper.

The priest tried his best to console Mrs Frost and after saying a prayer together she calmed down enough to return home; which was within walking distance of the church. Father Ignatius promised to call on them the next day after morning Mass.

Thankfully Mr Frost was at home and with his usual patience and gentleness Father Ignatius succeeded in getting them to discuss their problem. Amongst the tears and prayers it soon became apparent that their troubles stemmed from lack of communication leading to misunderstandings and confusion.

“Praise the Lord ...” said the priest gently, “you really do love each other deeply; yet you can't hear each other because of the noise of your busy lifestyles.

GOLDEN DROPS

“Let me tell you a story which perhaps may help you to focus on what is going on here ...” continued Father Ignatius,

“There once was a married couple who'd been together for many years; longer than the two of you have been married.

“One day the wife was unwell with a heavy cold. Her loving husband stayed at home and helped around the house. After seeing the children to school he offered to make her something to eat.

“She asked for a salad sandwich made with a French baguette which they had just bought that morning.

“The husband went into the kitchen, cut the ends of the French baguette, and with the middle bit made the most delicious sandwich, with tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers - just as his wife likes it.

“She must have felt pretty bad that day, because when he presented the sandwich to her she snapped ‘Why do you always cut the end bits of the baguette for yourself? They're my favorite!’

“He smiled and said ‘My dear, I hate the end bits, they're crunchy and dry ... I've been having them for years because I thought you hated them too!’

“You see ... all these years he was trying to please her, and little did he know that she preferred the end bits of the French bread ... and all this time she thought he was selfish by taking her favorite bits of the bread to himself, but she said nothing because she loved him as much as he loved her ... all because of lack of communication.

“How many problems can be avoided in life if we learn to communicate honestly and openly with each other?

“So as I leave you can I urge you please to find out how you like your sandwiches,” he concluded with a smile.

GOLDEN DROPS

CHOCOLATE SIN

Father Ignatius was at the supermarket pushing his trolley slowly from one aisle to the next and reading his shopping list as he went along. He rarely visited the confectionery counters but this time he made a special detour to buy a box of chocolates for Mrs Davenport, his housekeeper, whose birthday was the following day.

Just as he entered the aisle he saw one of his parishioners there standing a few feet away. He was a successful local business man and a regular in church every Sunday and at confession every Saturday morning.

The priest was about to greet him when what he saw next made him suddenly stop in his tracks and freeze on the spot.

The business man took a chocolate bar from the shelf and put it in his pocket. He then moved away nonchalantly as if nothing happened.

Father Ignatius faced a sudden dilemma. Should he confront the man and tell him what he did is wrong. This may well cause a scene at the store as the man may well deny any wrongdoing.

Or should he inform a member of staff about what he had just witnessed and leave the matter to them.

Or should he just do nothing. Look the other way. Condone stealing through his lack of actions.

As the man casually walked out of the store Father Ignatius decided to let matters rest. He walked up the aisle and bought an identical chocolate bar as the man had just stolen.

Two days later Father Ignatius was hearing confessions as he normally does on Saturday mornings.

He sat at his confessional, which was one of those old fashioned wooden cubicles where he sat in the middle, and on either side people would kneel and speak to him through a small aperture covered by a thick curtain so that he would not see who is kneeling there.

He often smiled to himself at the intricacies of these old contraptions.

“What is the point of all this secrecy” he asked himself, “when I can usually tell who is on the other side of the curtain by their voice?”

Father Ignatius had a good memory for faces and voices and more often than not he knew who was confessing their sins to him. He had his regulars turning up Saturday after Saturday seeking absolution and listening to his wise words before leaving with a much lighter heart to pray their penance.

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“Even their sins are always the same ...” smiled Father Ignatius to himself as he waited for his first parishioner to kneel by his side, “sometimes I could recite their sins for them ... but then, they’d think I can read minds ...” he chuckled silently.

“Well at least they’re a good lot generally ... not terrible sinners most of them ...”

About half-an-hour later the business man he saw at the store came for his usual Saturday confession. Father Ignatius listened attentively to him and noted that he had not mentioned the incident at the store.

After the man had finished talking Father Ignatius whispered quietly through the heavy curtain, “for your penance I want you to take this ...”

And he handed him the chocolate bar he’d bought from the store through the heavy curtain dividing both men.

The man took the chocolate bar and mumbled quietly, “I don’t understand.”

“It is your favorite chocolate is it not?” asked the priest.

“Er ... yes it is.”

“Two days ago I saw you pocket a similar bar in the supermarket ... am I right?”

“Yes ... Father ...” mumbled the man after a short pause.

“You see my son,” continued Father Ignatius, “I wasn’t the only one who saw you steal that chocolate bar ... God saw it too ... I spoke to Him about it ... and He asked me to buy you a similar chocolate bar ...”

The man said nothing, feeling both ashamed and totally repentant in his heart.

“For your penance I want you to enjoy this chocolate bar,” continued the priest quietly, “but I also want you to promise that you will never steal anything ever again ... is that a deal?”

“Yes Father,” mumbled the man behind the curtain.

“And remember ... next time you do something wrong, I may not be there to witness it ... and God alone may be the one seeing your wrongdoing ...”

“Yes Father!” repeated the repentant man as the priest absolved his sins and sent him in peace to fulfil his penance.

GOLDEN DROPS

FATHER IGNATIUS' DILEMMA

There are times in life when similar events happen in close proximity to each other and we're left to wonder whether it's only a mere coincidence, or a God incidence. Maybe the Almighty is telling us something, or leading us in a certain direction perhaps.

A few days after Father Ignatius witnessed one of his parishioners shoplifting from the local supermarket, he had occasion to witness something else similar which taxed his tact and diplomacy, not to say his duties and responsibilities as a priest.

He was at the local Grand Hotel for an Ecumenical Meeting of a number of churches in town. As the meeting broke up for a coffee break he approached the Reception Desk to ask the attendant where the phone booth was located. It was then that he noticed, quite by accident, one of his parishioners, a man in his early fifties, sitting at a table in the lounge with a young lady well half his age.

At first he thought nothing of it; but when he returned from the phone booth it occurred to him that the parishioner was unusually well dressed in a smart suit. Not the sort of attire he'd seen him wear in church; not even on a Sunday. Granted the man was well dressed when he attended Mass with his wife and children, but never in a suit, just casual clothes.

"Perhaps he's here on business" said the priest to himself, as he dispelled any thoughts from his mind; no doubt planted there by the devil just to tease him.

An hour or so later, when all the priests and vicars gathered together in the large dining room for lunch, Father Ignatius noticed the parishioner and his young lady companion having lunch at a corner table. The waiter had just opened a bottle of wine and was serving them.

The priest mingled with other Conference delegates and sat at a table as far away as he could, just by the window facing the car park.

He tried to concentrate on the business in hand and discuss Ecumenical matters with the other delegates; but the devil must have been particularly mischievous that day as he bombarded Father Ignatius with all kind of thoughts.

As the waiter offered him a cup of coffee at the end of the meal Father Ignatius noticed through the window the couple wave for a taxi. As the cab approached, the man hugged the young lady tightly and kissed her on the cheek. He then waved her good-bye as the taxi drove off, and blew a kiss in her direction. It all happened so quickly that the priest could not believe what he had seen.

"Aha ..." said the devil in his ear, "who are you going to believe now? Me or your eyes?"

This encounter at the hotel preyed on Father Ignatius' mind all day. It could all be a perfectly innocent situation, easily explainable, he convinced himself. But the devil would have none of it and continued pestering him with alternative scenarios.

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That evening he broached the subject with Father Donald as they sat for their meal.

“Suppose you suspect one of the parishioners is doing something wrong Donald, what would you do about it?” he asked innocently.

“Well ... it depends what they were doing ...” replied his colleague in his broad Scottish accent.

“OK ... last week for instance I saw a parishioner shop-lifting ... I said nothing at the time ... but dealt with it during Confession ...”

“Seems fine to me ... I would probably have done the same ...” said Father Donald.

“Let me then give you another example ... suppose for instance you suspected a married man was cheating on his wife ... what would you do then? Would you confront him with it and tell him it’s wrong?”

“Where I come from in Scotland you would probably get a Glasgow kiss resulting in a broken nose or worse, if you did that,” chuckled Father Donald.

“So we look the other way ... we condone a sin ... is that it?”

“It’s a fact of life Ignatius ... modern lifestyles and all that ... we may not like it but we can’t do much about it ... People will sin ... just as well I say, otherwise they’d get us out of business ...” Father Donald laughed heartily

“Seriously though ...” continued Father Ignatius, “is it not incumbent upon us to put them straight when they err ... is that not our duty as priests?”

“What I like about you Ignatius is that you’re a very kind sort of person ... you have this great ability to empathize ... you feel for the other person and you’d do anything to help them ... to keep them from the wrong path and to lead them to salvation ... I’m more pragmatic I suppose ... I’ll let them sin and absolve them when they ask me to ...” joked Father Donald.

He was only joking, of course, because in reality Father Donald cared for his flock deeply.

“You know ...” continued Father Ignatius after a short pause, “we priests have a huge responsibility towards our Lord. Because when we get to meet Him He’ll ask us how we led those He put in our care. It won’t be a question of how many Ecumenical meetings we’ve attended, or how many confessions we heard; but how many of those He sent us we have led safely to Heaven.

“Let’s say for instance a priest faces God and it is found that only 1 % of the people he had in his care throughout his priesthood made it to Heaven.

“What will God say then? A good and faithful servant, or a shepherd who has lost most of his sheep?”

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“And that’s the responsibility we owe God when we take on our vocation.”

The few seconds of silence which followed spoke volumes in their minds as they mulled over the situation.

Father Ignatius pondered the dilemma of the modern day priest compared to the preaching of John the Baptist who reproached his King so much that he lost his head. Or to the teachings of St Paul never shying away from telling it as it is.

Yet somehow ... times change and it takes a very brave priest indeed to approach a parishioner and tell him that what he is doing is wrong. Or indeed to speak out against the wrongdoings of society.

“I wonder ...” he thought to himself, “has any priest ever refused to absolve someone in the confessional?”

The following Sunday Father Ignatius was surprised to see the parishioner in question with his wife and the young lady attending Mass.

After Mass the young lady was introduced as the man’s niece visiting from France. She’d been staying secretly at the hotel and plotting a surprise Wedding Anniversary holiday in Paris for her uncle and aunt. That very evening the whole family had gathered at the hotel to celebrate their 25th Anniversary together with other relatives who had travelled from near and far.

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MEMORIES, MEMORIES

Father Ignatius was certainly the product of his up-bringing.

Raised in a poor family who had known real hardship; yet at the same time a family held together, despite all the turmoil that life threw at them, by a common bond of mutual love and basic Christian principles.

It's because of his up-bringing, and because he grew up with very little materially, that he developed a habit of frugality and saving whatever he could rather than wasting it away.

He had taken a private vow of poverty when he became a priest, and since then he spent as little as possible on himself. He was not mean in the sense of avarice since anything he had, or whatever else came his way in terms of money or goods, he eagerly shared with the poor in his parish.

The little he kept for himself was usually either books or certain items he had collected over the years and kept for their sentimental value.

One Friday afternoon he decided to clear up the spare room of personal items he had not used for ages. He decided to donate them to the rummage sale in aid of the elderly.

As he was searching through a box full of books he found an old vinyl record; the old 45 rpm type record, black in color in a torn paper sleeve. He looked at the title of the song and sat down on a nearby chair.

Suddenly, the memories came flooding fast. He held the record in his shaking hand, as tears welled up in his eyes. He hadn't seen nor played it for years, yet here it was, like a ghost from years long past, awakening distant memories so long forgotten.

He remembered how, as a child, he had saved all his pocket money, and went to the music store after school to buy this particular record as a birthday present for his dear father. Now departed.

The song was quite popular then.

He remembered his father's reaction when he opened the brown paper bag and pulled out the shiny black vinyl record.

His parental eyes welled up too all those years ago, the same as Father Ignatius' eyes are welling up right now.

His father placed the record on the table and said nothing. He just held little Ignatius tightly in his strong arms and kissed his head gently. Ignatius was held so tight that he could hear his father's heart beating in his chest.

He could hear it beating right now, as he sat there holding the record in his shaking hand. And strangely as it may seem, the experience also brought to mind the sweet

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smell of cooking as they all gathered there as a family in the kitchen that cold winter evening.

His mother moved towards the table, leaving for a moment the food on the stove, and picked up the record.

“How lovely ...” she said as she read the title.

She too then hugged little Ignatius as tightly as she could.

The priest remembered that that particular day was the first and only time he had seen his father cry. Silently, he had wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and quietly said: “Thank you ... son”.

He was a big strong man, not given to much emotions or small talk. He had probably invented the British stiff upper lip and kept his feelings well hidden within himself. Usually silent at the best of times; mumbling the odd “yes dear ...” whenever his wife asked him something. A gentle giant in every respect.

His father had known extreme poverty and hardship throughout his life, having lived through the depression and economic crisis.

Father Ignatius recalled how his father told him that many a time, when he was a child during the depression, he had gone to bed at night with nothing to eat; because there was simply no food in the house. Those were terrible times indeed, as his father often recalled.

He remembered that his father had worked the land from the age of eleven, leaving school with little or no education. It was the done thing in those days, to work hard at an early age to help the family beat off starvation.

And in later years, as young Ignatius was growing up, his father still continued to work hard on the farm to bring enough food to feed his family. His mother too, took on washing to earn a few pennies to supplement the family budget.

Yet despite their impoverished state Ignatius never had to go hungry, as his father did before him; and he was always well dressed and cared for by his parents.

He wondered about all the sacrifices his parents must have made, and how much they had gone without, to ensure that Ignatius lacked nothing as he grew up.

Father Ignatius then brought to mind the day when, as a young man, he built up the courage to tell his parents after the evening meal that he had decided he wished to become a priest.

How he had feared their reaction on hearing the news.

Although they were a good Christian family, he often suspected that his father wanted him to take over the small farm he had built up over the years. How would he react to the news that his son would not follow in his footsteps as a farmer?

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“Mom ... dad ... I’ve been thinking and praying about this for a while. I want to become a priest ...” were the opening words to an announcement that he dreaded making.

His father just smiled gently and said: “Son ... I am proud of you.”

Father Ignatius could hear those words ringing in his ears, as clear as if they’d just been spoken; and he sobbed gently as he remembered his parents now both in Paradise. No doubt looking down on him, and hopefully still proud of him.

He said a silent prayer as he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

He then went to his room and put the record on the turntable and one more time let the lyrics come to life.

GOLDEN DROPS

TOO HEAVY

Father Ignatius was not necessarily orthodox when it came to delivering a sermon. If there was something he could say or do to make his point forcibly he would certainly do so.

One Sunday before Mass started he left a suitcase by the lectern where he was to deliver his sermon.

At the appropriate time he looked at the children sitting up front in church and asked: “Who knows what it means to have a chip on your shoulder?”

A few hands were raised high. He pointed to a young girl who said: “It means moaning all the time and feeling hard done by.”

“Exactly ...” said Father Ignatius, “how clever of you. It means feeling over-sensitive and badly treated. And some people I know don’t just have one solitary chip on their shoulder, but they have a whole super-sized packet of chips and a large hamburger and a milk-shake too!”

The congregation laughed.

“And that’s the problem you see ...” continued the priest, “many people in this world live life carrying heavy baggage from the past rather than rejoice in what God is doing for them right now.”

Father Ignatius stopped for a moment and looked down at the suitcase by the lectern.

“Which brings me to this item here ...” he said, “I need two strong men to help me please.”

He looked up and waited until two men left their pews and joined him by the lectern. He asked one of them to carry the suitcase a few paces down the center aisle. It was fairly heavy, but the man managed it. He then asked the second man to return the suitcase to him; which he did with some difficulty.

“I think we have shown here how difficult it is to carry such heavy baggage with you for the rest of your life,” said Father Ignatius as the two men returned to their seats.

“Imagine carrying this with you always. You’ll soon get tired and it will certainly slow you down. Wouldn’t it be great to get rid of it altogether?”

“Let’s see what’s inside.”

He opened the suitcase and revealed a number of bricks. On each one he had stuck a label which he read out loud:

“Now these heavy bricks represent all the troubles and worries, or excuses even, which we may carry with us throughout our lives. Let’s see what they say ...”

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“This one reads ‘it’s my up-bringing that holds me back, I grew up in a broken family when my parents divorced, it’s scarred me for life’

“And this one says ‘I left school with no education, my parents didn’t send me to a good school, what chance have I got?’

“Let’s see this brick here ... ‘my health has always been poor, I can’t help it,’

“As for this one, I like this one, it says ‘I must have been born unlucky, nothing ever works out for me! I’m destined to fail.’

“There’s a few more bricks here,” continued Father Ignatius, “you can read them afterwards if you wish.”

He put the bricks down by the suitcase and looked gently at the congregation.

“Please don’t misunderstand me. I am not in any way making light of people’s difficulties. I do accept that some people have genuine and very difficult obstacles to overcome every day of their lives. And I am often inspired by their fortitude and great Faith as they go through life despite such hardship ...

“The problem I’m addressing now is where people, for a variety of reasons, still cling to something in their past as a crutch or prop to explain away their present state in life.

“And they continue to carry this heavy weight, real or imagined, like this suitcase here beside me. Their issue could be their up-bringing, their education, their background ... or a great hurt they suffered in the past, which still gnaws deep inside them and goes unforgiven.

“It could be anything ... a heavy weight which they carry for ever because they just can’t let go.

“This heavy weight slows them down throughout life and hinders their progress towards God.

“Let us have the courage to let go the heavy baggage in our lives.

“Let us trust God to help us as we go on in life.

“Jesus carried a heavy Cross on His way to Calvary. He asked us to take up our Cross and follow Him.

“Let not the weight of your Cross crush you down; but instead use it to climb up to Heaven to Christ’s welcoming arms.”

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FATHER IGNATIUS IN HOSPITAL

Father Ignatius had visited his parishioners in hospital so many times that he was now well known by the medical staff and the nurses. So it came as no surprise to him when one afternoon he was phoned by the Hospital Ward Matron and asked to come over as quickly as possible. Agatha Dartford had been admitted to hospital by ambulance and she was asking for him by name.

Agatha was 93 years old and three years ago, being no longer able to look after herself, she had to leave her lovely cottage in the countryside and she was moved by her family to the Green Meadows Home for Senior Citizens.

She lost her independence that day, as well as all the lovely memories which her little cottage in the country contained. She had moved in that little house many years ago just after marrying her husband. She raised her family there; all five of them who have now grown up and moved to other towns and cities far away with their own families.

The day she moved to Green Meadows was a dark day indeed in her life. She knew it was the logical thing to do of course; but sometimes logic really hurts. There's no way that a frail person like her could look after herself alone in the countryside. So her family decided to sell her cottage and most of the furniture and other items which they did not want and moved her to the Home more through coercion than love.

"It's better for you Mom. They can look after you better there; and you'll have company with other people ..." they said; "Green Meadows will provide you with all you need and you won't have to cook or clean or do any of the household chores anymore. Aren't you lucky Mom ... it will be wonderful!"

But Agatha liked to cook for herself, and to eat when she wanted, sleep when she wanted and do as she wishes; rather than be regimented in a home with other people. Yet; old age teaches you patience and it teaches you to accept what is inevitable and outside your control. She was rather weak and in poor health so it seemed logical to have someone care for her; but wouldn't it have been nice to live with one of her children and enjoy the company of her grand-children and see them grow up!

"We'll come and visit you often ..." was no substitute to living with her family and share their lives and dreams and hopes. To see them every day in good times and bad and to share their lives together.

Her children had all done well in life and all had large houses which could have easily accommodated her; but she'd be in the way no doubt and would cramp their successful lifestyles. They'd made that plain enough; even though they never actually said it. So, reluctantly she accepted their decision and did move to Green Meadows; and indeed they did look after her very well in there. The personnel were very kind and helpful, including the nurses and medics whenever she needed them.

As for her family ... yes ... they visited her as promised ... about once a year or so.

She was fortunate enough to have befriended Father Ignatius who used to visit another resident at Green Meadows.

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So he visited her regularly about once a week and sometimes he brought her some of her favorite chocolate cakes from the bakery just next to St Vincent Church. They normally chatted for about half-an-hour or so and then they recited the Rosary together before blessing her and giving her Holy Communion.

Today, however, the priest was rushing to the hospital in response to her calls for help. When he arrived there he was greeted by the Hospital Ward Matron who knew him well. She explained that Agatha had fallen at Green Meadows Home and had bruised her arm and left side badly. She was obviously in terrible pain and the medics wanted to take some X Rays photos to check that there are no broken bones. But Agatha would not co-operate despite her obvious pain. The nurses tried to help her prepare for the X Ray tests and she held her left arm close against her chest and would not open her hand which was closed tightly. They asked her what she was holding but she would not respond and closed her hand tighter still; asking for Father Ignatius to come and see her.

“Thank you for calling me Denise ...” said Father Ignatius to the Ward Matron, “perhaps you’ll take me to her.”

Moments later he entered Agatha’s room and the nurses in attendance left closing the door behind them.

“Hello Agatha ...” said the priest gently, “you’ve given us quite a fright ... tell me what happened to you ...”

“I fell at the Home Father ... and they brought me here by ambulance ...”

“Ah ... I see; any excuse to escape Green Meadows is it ...” he smiled, “or is it a trick to get me to bring you some chocolate cake?” She smiled back and her eyes brightened at the thought.

“They want me to have some X Ray photos Father ... and they want to take this from me ...” she added motioning her clenched hand.

“I don’t understand ...” said the priest calmly.

“When I moved to Green Meadows three years ago ... just after my 90th Birthday it was ... I lost everything. My children sold my house, they sold my furniture ... and took away whatever ornaments and little things I had ... or got rid of what they did not want. I had some lovely porcelain ornaments Father; and they sold the lot; or took the valuable ones for themselves.

“They moved me to Green Prison ... that’s what I call it ... with only the clothes I was wearing. That’s the rules of that place. They provide you with everything; including your clothes you know ... My children even took all my old photographs of my dear Ken and I when we were wed ... and the photos of the children as they grew up ... and every bit of souvenir and memory that I had in that little cottage were I spent all those years ... I have nothing in this world that belongs to me ...

“Except this ...” she said shaking her tightly closed hand gently.

GOLDEN DROPS

“And now the nurses want to take even this ... I want to go back to my cottage Father!”

Father Ignatius hugged her gently so as not to hurt her where she was bruised and kissed her forehead.

“Now then Agatha ... you know well that your cottage was out in the country ... and if you were to go back there it would mean that I’ll have a terribly long drive to come and visit you ... you don’t really plan to inconvenience me do you?”

“No Father ...” she said smiling.

“Besides ... at Green Meadows they look after you well don’t they?”

She nodded.

“And it’s so much nearer for me ...to come and visit you” he smiled.

“But I tell you what ... as soon as you get out of hospital I’ll arrange with the Warden at Green Meadows to take you out for a drive in the countryside and we can visit your cottage. Would you like that?”

“Yes Father ...” she replied enthusiastically.

“But first we need to have these X Rays done to make sure you’re OK. Can we ask the nurses to get on with this do you think?”

She nodded.

“Would you look after this for me Father?” she asked as she finally opened her hand.

And there, held ever so tightly that it had imprinted itself in her palm was a finger Rosary.

“You remember you gave me this some years ago Father?” she said.

The priest nodded gently.

“It’s all I have in the world that is mine. And I use it every time we recite the Rosary together and also every day when I sit by the window watching the birds in the garden at Green Meadows.”

Father Ignatius took good care of Agatha’s finger Rosary; and returned it to her when she’d had her X Rays done.

He also kept his promise and took her for a drive in the countryside by her cottage when she was eventually discharged from the hospital fully recuperated. And he took her to her favorite bakery for chocolate cakes and tea too!

GOLDEN DROPS

CONFESSIONAL SECRETS

Friday afternoon was Catechism class with the youngsters from the local Catholic school. Father Ignatius duly attended every week to face the eager pupils who expected straight answers.

He knew that at that age he had to satisfy their curiosity as well as answer as honestly as possible their questions on church dogma and the mysteries of Christianity. He was blessed with a great sense of humour and certainly made liberal use of it to press his point home, or to alleviate any tense situation which might arise.

Today's Catechism discussion was about the act of Confession.

"Did you ever have to hear a really naughty confession Father?" asked an inquisitive youngster.

"You know very well, a priest never tells what he hears in Confession." replied Father Ignatius.

"Oh ... come on Father ... tell us ... you don't have to give names ..." pleaded another pupil.

"What's the worst sin you've ever heard?" added a third.

"Did anyone ever tell you they murdered somebody?" asked an inventive boy.

Their imaginations were running wild and the priest knew when he was beaten. He had to humor them in order to gain their attention. He gestured with his hands to beckon their silence. He then smiled and said:

"When I first came here to St Vincent Church I did not know anybody. I arrived on a Friday evening and the next morning at ten I had to hear Confessions.

"I entered the confessional and said a few prayers whilst waiting for the first people to come in. And sure enough they did, one by one as you know full well.

"One of the many people coming to confession that morning said to me: 'I am not from this town Father; just passing through.'

'Really?' I replied. 'It doesn't matter who you are. I don't have to know your identity.'

'Yeh ... I'm with the travelling circus ... we're only here for a few days.' said the voice on the other side of the confessional.

'The circus,' I said to the man kneeling there, 'I've never been to the circus. Always wanted to as a child ... What do you do in the circus?'

'I'm an acrobat!'

GOLDEN DROPS

“I was really excited to have an acrobat in my confessional. I’d always wanted to be an acrobat as a child, before becoming a priest, and I’d never seen a real one performing in the circus.

“So I decided to ask him something unusual.

‘Tell you what.’ I said to him, ‘Would you mind performing some of your act for me? I don’t have time to come and see you at the circus. The church is empty now, and as you’re the last one here, no one would know anyway. Would you mind doing some acrobatics in the side aisle and I’ll hide here behind the curtain and watch you.

“To my surprise and relief the circus performer said ‘Sure Father, it’ll be a pleasure. A bit unusual, but a pleasure all the same!’

“He then got out of the confessional and started his little show by standing upside down in the middle of the aisle. Then he balanced on one hand and hopped about a bit; and then he hopped on the other hand. He followed this with a few somersaults backward and a few forwards in mid-air. Then he balanced a chair on his nose whilst juggling with a few candles he picked up from a statue nearby. He finished with a few more somersaults and hand-stands on the back of the pews!”

“Gosh ...” said a few youngsters in amazement. “That’s fantastic. What happened next?”

“What I didn’t realize,” continued the priest “is that watching from the back pews were two elderly ladies.

“I heard one say to the other ‘Let’s go home; this new priest is out of his mind. I’m not doing any acrobatics as a penance for my sins!’ ”

GOLDEN DROPS

FOR WHOM THE COCK CROWS

Sunday Mass was over and everyone had left. Father Ignatius was clearing up in the Sacristy when Arthur, a young Altar Boy, came in sheepishly.

“Are you still here?” asked the priest.

“Yes Father ... can I ask you something please?” replied the young teenager.

“Fire away ...” encouraged the priest as he sat down.

“I think I committed a sin yesterday ... and I took Communion today.”

“You think ... are you not sure? What did you do?” asked Father Ignatius gently.

“I was at the Karate Club yesterday. I go every Saturday. During break some of the boys were talking about Jesus and they were mocking and laughing. They were telling jokes about Him and saying bad things!”

“I see ... and what did you do?”

“That’s it ...” hesitated the young lad, “I did nothing. I didn’t want to tell them about Jesus in case they laughed at me. I just kept quiet and smiled.”

“I understand ...” said Father Ignatius pausing slightly, “have you told Peter about this?”

“Peter Marsden?”

“No ... not Peter Marsden! Who is he anyway?” asked the priest frowning a little.

“He is our Karate Instructor ... we call him Sensei ...” replied young Arthur.

Father Ignatius smiled.

“I meant St Peter ...” he continued, “you know him? We have a large statue of him at the back of the church.”

The boy nodded.

“What do you know about him?”

“He was a disciple of Jesus,” said Arthur.

“That’s right ... and like you he was a little hesitant when asked about Jesus. When Jesus was arrested Peter denied knowing Him three times. And then the cock crew and reminded Peter of what Jesus had said ... do you know the story?” asked Father Ignatius.

Arthur nodded again.

GOLDEN DROPS

“The important thing to remember Arthur,” continued Father Ignatius gently, “is that Peter was sorry at what he had done; and Jesus forgave him. And Peter went on to become head of the Church.

“I quite understand that you felt a little intimidated yesterday. Jesus understands it too, and He forgives you just as He forgave Peter.

“But remember this Arthur ... as you grow up there will be other occasions when you’ll be faced with the same situation. People will mock Jesus, God or your religion. This is the way of the world I’m afraid. Jesus has many enemies in this world, despite all He has done for us.

“It’s at those times when I pray and hope that you’ll have the courage to stand up for Jesus and for your beliefs.

“What happened yesterday is understandable in the life of someone so young as yourself.

“The sad tragedy Arthur is that grown-ups often deny knowing and loving Jesus for fear of what others might say. In a free society as we enjoy these days, compared to the times of Peter, grown-ups still shy away from knowing and loving the Lord. They keep their heads down in embarrassment.”

Father Ignatius looked at the child in the eye and asked.

“You’re learning Karate you say?”

Arthur nodded.

“Good ...” said the priest, “that’s a defensive martial art. Isn’t it?”

“You should remember always to defend the Lord, Arthur. Not with your fighting skills, but with your wisdom, your pure soul and by the way you live.

“The Good Lord will help you to know what to say and when to say it.

“You’re the Karate Altar Boy ... defending the Lord with your soul!”

Arthur smiled broadly.

“Now you’d better hurry home before your parents start worrying about you.”

As the young boy turned to leave Father Ignatius added, “and don’t forget to pray for me ... I need prayers too you know!”

GOLDEN DROPS

FATHER IGNATIUS MAKES A DISCOVERY

There are times when a light turns on in your head and you see something clearly for the first time and understand something new you'd never realized before.

Father Ignatius was a studious type of person spending many hours reading the Bible as well as many books on theology, ancient history and similar subjects which would soon send any lesser head spinning widely. One evening he retired to the room he called "my meditation corner" and after reciting the Rosary he started reading the Bible and cross-referencing certain passages with other books to better understand what God is teaching through His Word.

One passage in particular caught his interest. After Christ's death and burial, we are told that Mary Magdalene visited the tomb and found the stone rolled away from the entrance. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple and told them what she had seen. Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb. When Simon Peter got in and went inside he noticed the linen wrappings lying there, but the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded and lying to the side. There it was, John Chapter 20 Verse 7.

Father Ignatius puzzled about this for a moment or two. He'd read that chapter many times and nothing specific occurred to him. But this time, as if a small voice buzzing in his head, he kept wondering the significance of what he had read.

"Why are we told that the cloth which covered Jesus' head was folded and lying to the side? What's so important about that?" Father Ignatius asked himself. Yet somehow, John thought it important enough to mention it. Why?

Father Ignatius checked the other three Gospels but they did not mention this fact. "But why did John consider it so significant to point it out" he wondered silently.

After hours of searching other books and checking on ancient traditions he came upon something he'd never known before. In ancient Hebrew tradition the folded napkin was symbolic between the master of the house and his servant. When the servant set the dinner table he made sure that everything was perfectly set out as the master wished and then he would wait out of sight until the master finished eating. The servant would not clear the table until the master had finished.

When the master finished his meal he would wipe his fingers and mouth with the napkin and then toss the napkin on the table. The servant would then clear the table, because in those days a tossed napkin meant "I've finished."

However ... and this is the significant bit which Father Ignatius discovered for himself, if the master left the table but neatly folded the napkin and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not touch the table.

Because the folded napkin meant "I'm coming back!"

"He's coming back ..." mumbled Father Ignatius in wonderment.

That's what John was trying to tell us in his Gospel.

GOLDEN DROPS

FATHER IGNATIUS BREAKS A LEG

The letter had been on Father Ignatius' desk for about a week now. A local firm of Solicitors had asked him to attend a meeting scheduled for this morning. He tried getting through to them on the phone, but was never able to contact the signatory to the letter. The person answering the phone could not help either. Reluctantly, he decided to attend the meeting.

There were about a dozen people or so at the reading of the will. Mr Simmons was not particularly wealthy but he left a few small sums of money mainly to local charities, which the people at the meeting represented. He had no relatives or friends to speak of.

Father Ignatius knew of him. He visited Mr Simmons at home a few times to see him when he wasn't well, but usually Father Donald called on him since he never attended Mass. He lived alone on a farm on the outskirts of town.

The priest wondered why he had been named in the will instead of Father Donald. "Never mind," he thought, "whatever money he has left us will come useful in meeting the church's expenses."

"... and to Father Ignatius I bequeath the statue I valued so much. I request that he installs it in the front garden of the church for all to see and admire."

"What?" thought Father Ignatius, "he left us a statue?"

He asked the solicitor after everyone had gone whether he knew anything about the statue, but he could shed no light on it either. He explained that there's a life-size statue in a barn on the farm and that it will be sent to him in a week or so. He hadn't seen it personally so he could not even say what it was a statue of.

Father Ignatius wondered about this strange bequest for a whole week. Father Donald teased him "Maybe he made a statue of you to honour your good works. It'll look good in the middle of the car park. We can use it as a roundabout to control the traffic!"

At the breakfast table a few days later Father Ignatius was enjoying ginger marmalade on toast when Mrs Davenport, the housekeeper, came in and announced: "There's a removal van in the car park. They seem to be unloading something!"

The two priests went out to investigate, followed by Mrs Davenport.

"Is either of you two gentlemen Father Ignatius?" asked a fat man walking towards them.

"That's me."

"I have a delivery for you guv'nor. Would you sign here please ... and here ... and one more time here ... that's lovely! This box here is yours. And you can keep a copy of these papers too. Tara!" And he drove off accompanied by his mate.

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“It’s a big enough crate!” said Father Donald.

“We can’t keep it here. Let’s get some tools and open it”.

Minutes later, supervised by Mrs Davenport, they managed to remove the front panel of the upright wooden crate. It was full of straw which they gently removed revealing a shape taller than Father Donald; and he is over six feet tall. The shape was covered by cloth which was well held in place by heavy duty string.

The two men gingerly moved the shape out of the crate by sliding it to and fro until it was standing upright by itself in the car park. They then cut the string and removed the cloth wrapping the statue.

“Oh ... it’s a naked wee cherub!” declared Mrs Davenport, “just look at him ... isn't he cute?”

“Nothing wee about him,” said Father Donald, “he’s an overfed cherub who should have gone on a diet a long time ago.”

“Isn't he wonderful ... and he’s all naked too ... the little angel!” continued Mrs Davenport with a smile.

“Yes ... we have noticed,” replied Father Ignatius impatiently.

“Will you be putting him in the middle of the car park? He’ll look grand there,” suggested Mrs Davenport, “the parishioners will like him, I’m sure!”.

“We’ll do no such thing with this monstrosity,” was Father Ignatius’ abrupt reply.

“I don’t know,” teased Father Donald, “by installing him there we’d be the talk of the town. We could add a plaque saying he was bequeathed to the church in your honour Ignatius!”

Father Ignatius’ silence spoke volumes. He put the straw and cloth back in the crate and said: “We’ll have to remove him from here. Let’s put him in the garage for now. I’ll fetch a trolley to put him on.”

Minutes later the two priests tried to lift the statue onto the trolley. It was a little heavy but they managed it. As they pushed the trolley towards the garage one of its wheels must have caught something because it stopped abruptly and the statue slid forwards and fell to the ground before the two priests could do anything about it.

They moved away swiftly to avoid the statue crushing their feet; and after the initial shock of the sudden accident they realized that one of the cherub’s legs had been broken by the fall.

“Mercy me ...” cried Mrs Davenport, “the wee angel broke its leg!”

“We’re both all right, thank you ...” retorted Father Ignatius trying to keep calm.

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“Hey ... what’s this Ignatius?” said Father Donald pointing at the ground, “it looks like a small leather bag. It must have been inside the hollow statue.”

Father Ignatius pocketed the bag and the two priests eventually managed to store the statue, and its severed leg, inside the garage.

Moments later, in Father Ignatius’ office, the two priests opened the bag which contained seven little jewels. Five crystal in colour, and two red.

They didn’t know what to do about them, so Father Ignatius contacted the solicitors the next day who assured him that they belonged to him.

“They were in the statue and the statue is now yours, including its contents,” said the solicitor. “Mr Simmons had no family or friends to inherit his belongings. He left the statue to you, and had you not broken it we would never have known it contained anything. I suggest you keep or sell the so called jewels and use the proceeds as you wish.”

Well, the jewels were valued and sold for just over £8000 which helped with the church’s maintenance costs, and quite a bit besides to feed the poor of the Parish.

“The wee cherub may well have been naked,” remarked Mrs Davenport, “but he hid a treasure all right!”

GOLDEN DROPS

MANSION AND TWEED

As Father Ignatius drove into the church car park he was followed by a top of the range very expensive vehicle which stopped some distance away.

“That’s unusual” he thought, “I’ve never seen this car here before!”

Out came a tall well built man in his early sixties. He was immaculately dressed in a good quality tweed suit, white shirt and dark tie, and a heavy woollen dark blue overcoat. He locked his car and walked towards Father Ignatius.

“Good morning ...” he said in an impeccable English accent, “are you the Padre here?”

“Yes ... I am the Parish priest ...” replied Father Ignatius, “can I help you?”

“I’m Colonel Swanwick ...” replied the man stretching out his hand “retired!”

The priest shook the man’s hand and was impressed by the firm strong handshake.

“I’d like a few moments of your time please Padre ...” he said, “is there anywhere we can talk?”

“Yes ... of course ... you’d better come to my office ...”

Moments later and the priest had taken the Colonel up the stairs in the Parish House and into his office.

“I had a Catholic Padre in my regiment years ago ...” said Colonel Swanwick sitting down in the armchair by the window, “fine man indeed ...”

“Are you new in town?” asked Father Ignatius sitting at his desk, “I’ve not seen you in church before!”

“Oh no old boy ...” chuckled the Colonel in his perfect distinguished accent, “I’m not Catholic you know ... I was brought up Presbyterian ... same Army I suppose ... different regiment what?” He laughed heartily.

“Very amusing ...” the priest said feigning a weak smile.

“Any way ... I don’t go to church anymore ... haven’t been in years. Well Padre ... I need your help. It’s something that only someone in your regiment can deal with so to speak ...”

“You see ... not being Catholic myself this is a little peculiar for me and I don’t claim to understand it ... not a bit of it, I tell you!”

“What is it you don’t understand?” asked Father Ignatius patiently.

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“Well ... it’s this friend of mine ... I’ve known him for years ... we served together in Africa many years ago. Fine fellow of a man I tell you. An excellent soldier indeed! You know ... he saved my life years ago when we were under attack in an ambush and I was pinned down with a bullet in my leg. He came out there under enemy fire and pulled me back to safety. He is Catholic you know ...”

“I see ...”

“I haven’t seen him for years ... we correspond every now and then ... the odd Christmas card every year, that sort of thing ... no more. I’m not one for a lot of meaningless correspondence and all that ... too busy old boy. I only write when it’s important to do so and none of this casual chitchat ... waste of time and money I say!

“Well, I got news that the poor fellow has died after a short illness ... I received a letter from his wife a few days ago ...”

“I’m sorry to hear it ...”

“Yes quite ...” continued the Colonel, “damn inconvenient you know ... I can’t possibly attend the funeral. I have an important meeting at our Regimental Reunion Club. It’s down in Wales somewhere or other ... the funeral that is, not the Regimental Reunion ... that is held at the Grand Hotel in town. Have you ever been to Wales Padre?”

“Yes ... several times ...”

“Anyway ... It’s too far to go to Wales for a funeral ... once you’re dead and gone you’re gone ... that’s what I always say ... no need for ceremonials and all that. Funerals are held for the living not the dead. It’s just a get together to make the living feel better about the departed ... Waste of time and money ... just like writing meaningless letters and correspondence ...

“So that’s where you come in ... Being a Catholic just like this friend of mine. I’d like you to help me out of a tight spot as it were!” The Colonel smiled in expectation.

“Do you want me to attend the funeral for you?” asked the priest somewhat confused.

“Oh no ... goodness no ...” laughed Colonel Swanwick heartily, “it’s in Wales you know ... too far to go for a funeral ...

“I have been told that you Catholics have a Mass card ... is that what you call it? It’s been suggested to me that I should send his wife a Mass card. Apparently they’re not available from the shops and you obtain them from a priest. Is that right?”

“I understand ...” replied Father Ignatius as eventually he got to the purpose of this man’s visit, “you wish to offer a Mass for the repose of his soul.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean exactly ... but that’s right. That’s what I’ve been told. What is it that you do?”

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“It’s a tradition in the Catholic Church to offer Masses for others for any intentions. Sometimes people offer Masses in thanksgiving to God, and quite often for the dead. It’s a practice that originates in the very early Church. Inscriptions were discovered on tombs in ancient Roman catacombs in the second century providing evidence of this practice.”

“I see ... it’s like paying someone to pray for you. I remember reading about it in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales ...” chuckled the Colonel.

“It’s not as crudely as you put it ...” continued Father Ignatius patiently, “the Catholic Church considers Mass as the greatest possible prayer of intercession. So we offer the Mass to God for that particular intention ... for example for the repose of the person’s soul ...”

“Oh I do apologize Padre ...” interrupted the Colonel, “I meant no offence ... I can understand I suppose ... it’s like asking someone to put in a good word for you with the Almighty ...”

“I shall offer a Mass for your friend” said the priest patiently, “you can choose one of these cards to send to his widow ...”

“That’s jolly decent of you old boy ... thank you. I’ll take this one here ... how much is it?”

“You don’t have to pay anything ... I will sign the card and I’ll need your friend’s name ...”

“Oh no ... I insist ... how much is the card ... and the Mass too of course!” said Colonel Swanwick rather embarrassed about his faux pas.

“Well ... if you insist ...” Father Ignatius said with a smile to ease the tension a little, “the cost involved is that you have to give money to a charity, any charity you wish ... and the amount you give should be commensurate to how much this friend of yours meant to you. How much you really valued his friendship and what he did to you.”

“Good Heavens ... that should prove expensive considering he saved my life ...” chuckled the Colonel, “but I’ll gladly do it. I promise you of this.

“I’d also like to invite you for afternoon tea at my house. Just to show there’s no hard feelings and all that old boy. We’ve just moved into Happy Acres a couple of months ago ... it’s the house just by the Anglican Church out in the next village ... do you know it?”

“Yes ... of course ...” replied Father Ignatius recalling to mind the large mansion he’d passed frequently whilst visiting the vicar at the village Anglican Church.

“Jolly good ... jolly good,” repeated the Colonel, “I’ll check dates with my wife ... she’s in charge of Happy Acres HQ ... she’s a fine old girl you know ... does a lot of work at the Anglican Church ... choir practice ... bell ringing ... garden fêtes and all

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that. The vicar there knows her well ... Reverend Fellowes ... you've probably come across him in your travels ... different regiment yet again. Anyway ... I'll check dates with my wife and ring you back to fix a spot of tea and cream cakes."

As Colonel Swanwick drove out of the car park Father Ignatius wondered pensively about the Catholic Church's doctrines and traditions.

"I can understand someone like the Colonel being confused ..." he thought, "but do we do enough to explain to our parishioners why we do things the way we do them; and the real meanings behind our doctrines and traditions? A good subject for a sermon I think!"